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# HOW TO BE AN ACADEMIC HYPER-PRODUCER

DOCUMENTATION, ECONOFICTION ACADEMICS, HYPER-PRODUCER, UNIVERSITY

Are you an aspiring academic? If so, this manual will reveal the secret to maximizing your scholarly output. Follow my advice, and you too can become an academic hyper-producer.

## THE GOLDEN RULE: DON'T DO RESEARCH

Newcomers to the academy typically think that the recipe for success is to 'do high-quality research'. Nothing could be more false. 'Doing research' (and writing papers about your 'results')

is a tedious waste of time. It is no way to be hyper-productive. Savvy academics know that their true goal is to have their *name stamped* (as author) on stacks of published papers.

Here is a jingle to help you remember the golden rule:

Productive academics neither research nor write,  
That is their subordinates' plight.  
To inflate their way up the productivity ramp,  
academic hyper-producers perfect their namestamp.

## THE BILLBOARD

When you begin your scholarly enterprise, the first step is to frame academic papers in the correct light. Their purpose is not to 'convey knowledge'. Scholarly papers are devices for delivering authorship. They are billboards for your name.

Like an eye-catching advertisement, a good scholarly paper is soundly constructed yet easy to mass produce. To achieve the requisite economics of scale, the successful hyper-producer must *subcontract* the job of billboard construction.

If you've entered academia because you 'enjoy' doing your own research, now is the time to change your attitude (or exit the field). To become an academic hyper-producer, your goal is to secure billboards on which to stamp your name.

In what follows, I will detail the two most popular strategies for billboard acquisition.

## STRATEGY 1: GRAFFITI TAGGING

For the cunning entrepreneur, learning the art of graffiti tagging is a good way to become an academic hyper-producer. The goal is to surreptitiously add your namestamp to material published by someone else.

Graffiti tagging can be done either in wholesale or in piecemeal.

In the wholesale approach, you take a billboard and republish the whole thing with the appropriate change of authorship. To succeed at the wholesale graffiti tag, look for well-crafted billboards written by academics who are obscure. Because of their lack of fame, the hope is that no one will notice your authorship transfer. And if someone does notice, you can claim that the obscure academic stole *your* ideas (perhaps at a 'conference' where you 'conversed in private').

Another way to practice the wholesale graffiti tag is to *translate* the billboard in question into another language, and then publish the 'new work' with your namestamp. To get started with translation graffiti, you may want to do the conversion yourself. (Someone might ask you about the content of your billboard, so it is good to begin with a hands-on approach.) However, since translating text is nearly as labor intensive as writing it, you'll eventually want to subcontract the language rendering.

To scale up your translation graffiti, consider using AI to automate the job. With many languages

to choose from, you can potentially convert a single billboard into dozens of output publications. Once you've automated this rendering, you can up your game by using a dual conversion. For example, you use your AI bot to translate an English billboard into French. Then you get the bot to translate the French text back into English. The resulting copy will be sufficiently muddled that it can pass for a new paper. (If the text is still clear, simply increase the number of intermediate conversions.) Double conversion is also an effective way to produce 'academese' — text that is meaningless yet appears profound.

Alternatively, you can graffiti using the piecemeal approach. To practice the piecemeal tag, treat your work like a hip hop track. Your graffiti should sample small pieces of borrowed text, intermingled with your own prose. Since creating original writing takes time, I suggest that you also resample your own work. Take a paragraph from an old paper and mix it with some new samples from other people's work. The goal is to give the new billboard the appearance of originality, while minimizing your workflow.

Whatever graffiti method you choose, remember that you want to mass produce billboards that bear your name. If you happen to 'create knowledge', that's okay, so long as it is accidental.

## STRATEGY 2: SANCTIFIED NAMESTAMPING

All academic hyper-producers are masters at appropriating other people's ideas. However, only a few are cunning enough to graffiti tag. Most hyper-producers take a less-risky approach to namestamping: they put their name on billboards that are not yet published.

In principle, there is no difference between graffiti tagging a published paper versus namestamping during prepublication. Both techniques involve taking credit for material you didn't write. Oddly, however, prepublication namestamping is socially sanctioned, whereas graffiti tagging is not.

The difference comes down to the ritual of publication, which is a way to sanctify authorship. If you are caught namestamping a published paper, it is considered rude. However, if you insert your name *prior* to publication, the same authorship transfer is sanctimonious. Having stamped your name on an unpublished manuscript, you send the billboard to Cardinal Elsevier (or Bishops Taylor and Francis) for blessing. When the document returns from the consecration assembly line, your once-profane namestamp becomes sacred.

Another advantage of sanctified namestamping is that it is effectively permanent. Once blessed by Cardinal Elsevier, your authorship insertion becomes enshrined in academic canon and is almost impossible to change. To have your authorship removed, the publication priests must go through an arduous excommunication process called 'retraction'. Fortunately, successful retractions are rare. And when they do occur, they are not widely advertised (obviously, because doing so would demean the sanctity of publication).

Because of the advantages, I recommend that aspiring academics put most of their effort into sanctified, prepublication namestamping. Initially, this route takes more effort than graffiti

tagging, because you must secure a supply of unpublished papers. But because prepublication namestamping is institutionally sanctioned, it is far easier to scale. And that brings me to the second rule for being an academic hyper-producer: you must control the university's bowel system.

## CONTROLLING THE BOWEL SYSTEM

For the ambitious academic who takes the sanctified route to namestamping, your primary task is to secure a supply of unpublished billboards. To do that, you must look down.

Below the gleaming towers of your professorial office sits opportunity. Within the university's bowels, an army of contingent researchers pumps out a torrent of unpublished papers. Each one of these documents is a potential billboard for your name.

To control this supply of billboards, your goal is to become a PI — a *production invigilator*. Officially, the PI's job is to invigilate the transformation of grant money into the production of papers. Unofficially, it is standard practice to translate your PI power into authorship fealty.

Because you control the salaries of your research minions, you can impress upon them the 'norms' of your lab. When they write a paper, it is expected that they shall insert your name in the appropriate authorship slot. Research servants who buck at this request (which by the way, shouldn't be sent over email) can be quietly let go.

## CLIMBING THE RANKS OF MIDDLE MANAGEMENT

The key to academic hyper-productivity — extracting authorship fealty from research serfs — is easily understood but not easily obtained. Unfortunately, the academy frowns on nepotism and birthright. So even if you are a high-born, it will take some work to embed yourself in the professoriate (although far less work than if you are a low-born).

As much as you may loathe it, you will begin your career within the university bowel system. To claw your way out, I recommend a mixture of tactics.

If you are cunning, graffiti tagging may be a good option. If you lack the guile for surreptitious authorship, another approach is to form a namestamping cartel. Find a group of researchers who are willing to stamp each other's names on all their papers. As a rule, backdoor dealings are always a good idea.

Also consider blackmailing your fellow researchers. If you can find a juicy piece of misconduct (perhaps a graffiti tag that is poorly executed), use it to extort authorship fealty from your colleagues. If you are successful, this extortion skill will remain useful in your later career.

Having mastered these tactics, let's imagine that you are one of the lucky academics who climbs out of the university's bowels. Picture it: you've showered off the smell of subordination and arrived at your new job as a middle manager. You are now what academics call a 'professor'.

Sitting in your new office, you plot your next move. You think to yourself — how can I continue to

inflate my status?

An obvious choice is to resume your climb up the university hierarchy. But before you take this route, beware that within the academy, there is a curious distinction between mid-level and top-level brass.

Within the university hierarchy, top-level brass are considered true administrators. If these execs once called themselves 'scholars', they drop the ruse when they enter the C-suite. In contrast, mid-level brass do the work of administrators, but also masquerade as 'scientists'. This peculiar role comes with advantages and disadvantages. The downside is that the pay is more modest than at the top. The upside is that as 'scientists', middle managers retain the prestige that comes with having their names on lots of papers.

Once you reach middle management, you therefore face a choice: Do you maximize *income*? Or do you maximize *academic authorship*?

If you choose to maximize income, then continuing up the university hierarchy is a viable option. That said, university top brass are paid considerably less than their colleagues in the corporate sector. So if you value money, I recommend inflating your résumé and sending it off to Google or Facebook.

If you instead choose to maximize academic authorship, then you must obviously seek career advancement within the academy. However, you cannot simply resume your march up the university hierarchy. If you do, you risk losing your status as an 'academic'. To avoid this outcome, your self-promotion strategy must change. Rather than climb the hierarchy *within* your institution, you must now climb the hierarchy *between* universities. You must ascend the ladder of institutional prestige.

## THE PRESTIGE INSTINCT

Most academics have an instinctive sense that it is important to work at a prestigious institution. But when queried about the source of this instinct, the average scholar will offer a proximal response: prestige *feels good*. The prestige-seeking academic is therefore similar to the animal having sex: he/she seeks prestige because it is pleasurable, but has little awareness about why the activity is important.

In what follows, I will lift the hood of the prestige-seeking instinct. If you are an ambitious academic who naturally craves prestige, you needn't read on. As long as you heed your cravings, you will become a prolific namestamper while having no idea how it happened. (You will possess what philosopher Daniel Dennett calls 'competence without comprehension'.)

Perhaps, however, you are one of the rare academics with a low prestige drive. If so, it is crucial that you read on, for your career is not necessarily ruined. With sufficient practice, you can use your scientific faculties (which are otherwise unimportant) to coax your prestige drive out of hiding.

To that end, let us look at what happens when you (an ambitious academic) seek prestige. We will begin by giving institutional prestige a rigorous definition.

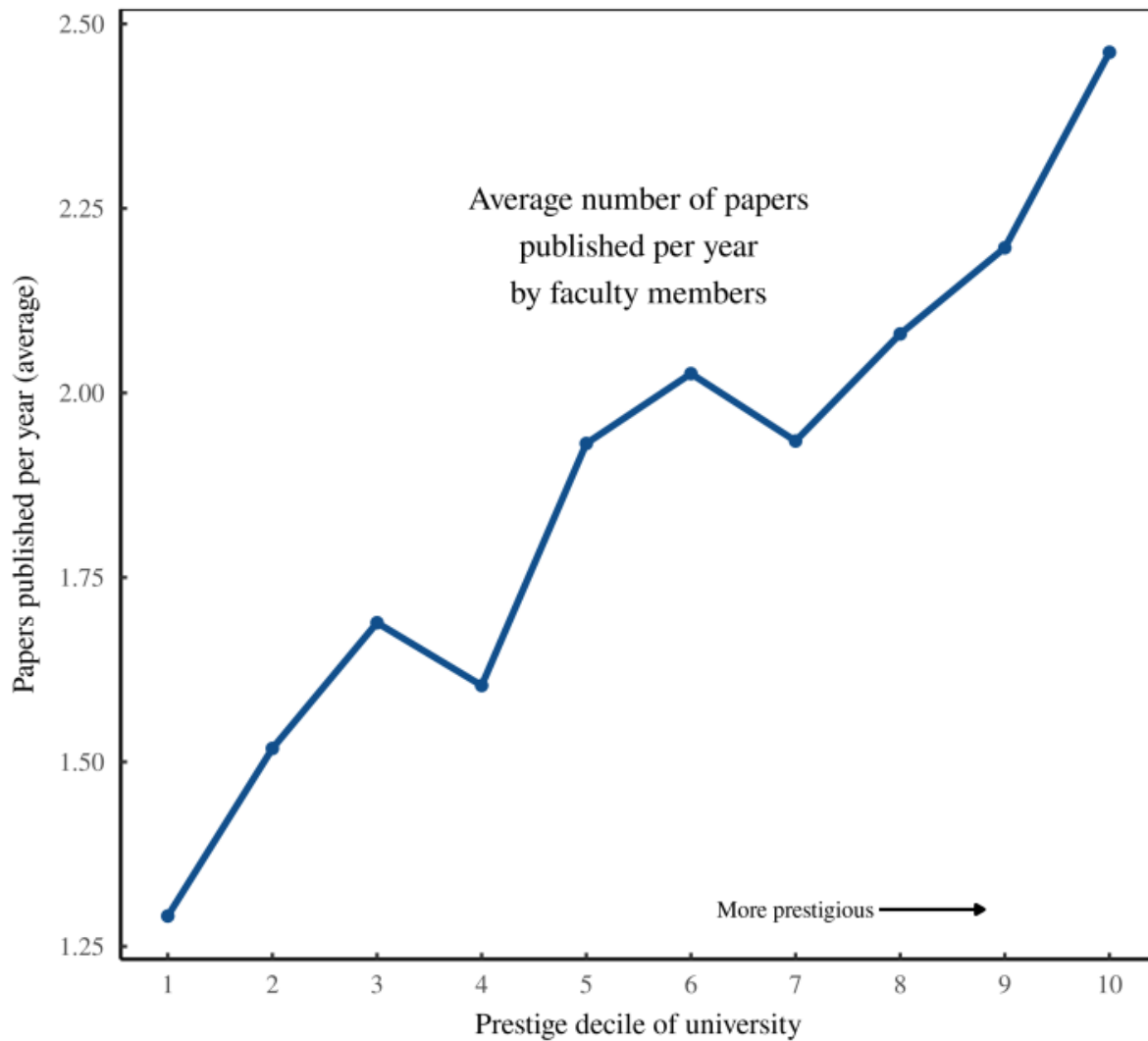
Many academics think (naively) that certain institutions are prestigious because their members do research of 'better quality'. This belief is a misconception. Good research can be done anywhere by almost anyone, meaning 'research quality' is entirely tangential to prestige. That said, prestigious universities tend to have better funding, which means they can invest more in creating research hype. The resulting hype landscape is important, because it sustains structural inequalities between universities. And these inequalities, in turn, form the bedrock of academic hyper-productivity.

Still, for the ambitious academic, research hype is best ignored. The risk is that by engaging with hype, you put unneeded focus on the 'quality' of your own research. This tangent will then distract you from the more crucial goal of namestamping. (Remember the golden rule of academic hyper-productivity: do not do research.)

To begin our journey into the prestige instinct, we must define 'prestige' in a way that has nothing to do with research 'quality'. To do that, we will (paradoxically) sully our hands with high-quality research. In a 2015 study, Aaron Clauset and colleagues measured the trade network between American universities. They found, unsurprisingly, that elite universities excel at exporting their graduates to other institutions. Because of this trade pattern, we can use the faculty export network to measure prestige. The more a university is able to pump out graduates who are then imported to other faculties, the higher the university ranks on the 'prestige hierarchy'.

If this 'high-quality research' bores you, let me stress that it has important ramifications for your career. We are about to lift the hood of the academic prestige drive. If you suffer from an inadequate prestige-seeking instinct, your career depends on the evidence that follows.

Academics seek prestige for a simple reason: it makes them *more productive*. Figure 1 shows the trend, as reported by Sam Zhang and colleagues. Here, the horizontal axis ranks universities according to their prestige (measured using the academic export network). The vertical axis shows the average number of papers published per year by the corresponding faculty. As you can see, climbing the prestige hierarchy is associated with a remarkable increase in productivity.



**Figure 1: Academics at prestigious universities are more productive.** This figure plots data from Zhang et al, 2022, who quantify academic productivity as a function of university 'prestige'. Note that 'prestige' (shown on the horizontal axis) is measured by the university's ability to export its graduates to other institutions. Productivity is measured by the number of papers published per year that bear the academic's name.

It is hard to over-emphasize the importance of this evidence. What we are looking at, in Figure 1, is the social environment that has conditioned the academic mind. In evolutionary terms, the academic's ultimate goal is to maximize his/her output of authorship. Over many generations of natural selection, this ultimate goal has led to the proximate desire to seek prestige. Why? Because prestige is a reliable route to authorship productivity.

The academic prestige drive, then, is the equivalent of the animal sex drive. It is an instinctive behavior that is pursued without knowledge of why the behavior is beneficial. The caveat, however, is that the academic prestige drive is not nearly as universal as the animal sex drive. Some academics lack a prestige drive entirely, and are therefore 'content' to spend their careers in the unproductive environment of state colleges.

Of course, this self-sabotaging behavior is necessary for the hyper-productivity of elite academics. (There can be no rich without the poor.) But I assume that unlike most state-college professors, *you* are an academic rife with ambition. If, despite your initiative, you lack a prestige-

seeking instinct, now is the time to *learn* this behavior. Your illustrious career depends on it.

## THE POSTDOC PARADOX

As a world-renowned productivity guru, I have shown the data in Figure 1 to many aspiring academics. Most of them lack the smarts to understand its importance. Since you are reading this how-to guide, I assume you are also of mediocre mind. So let me guide you to the correct conclusion.

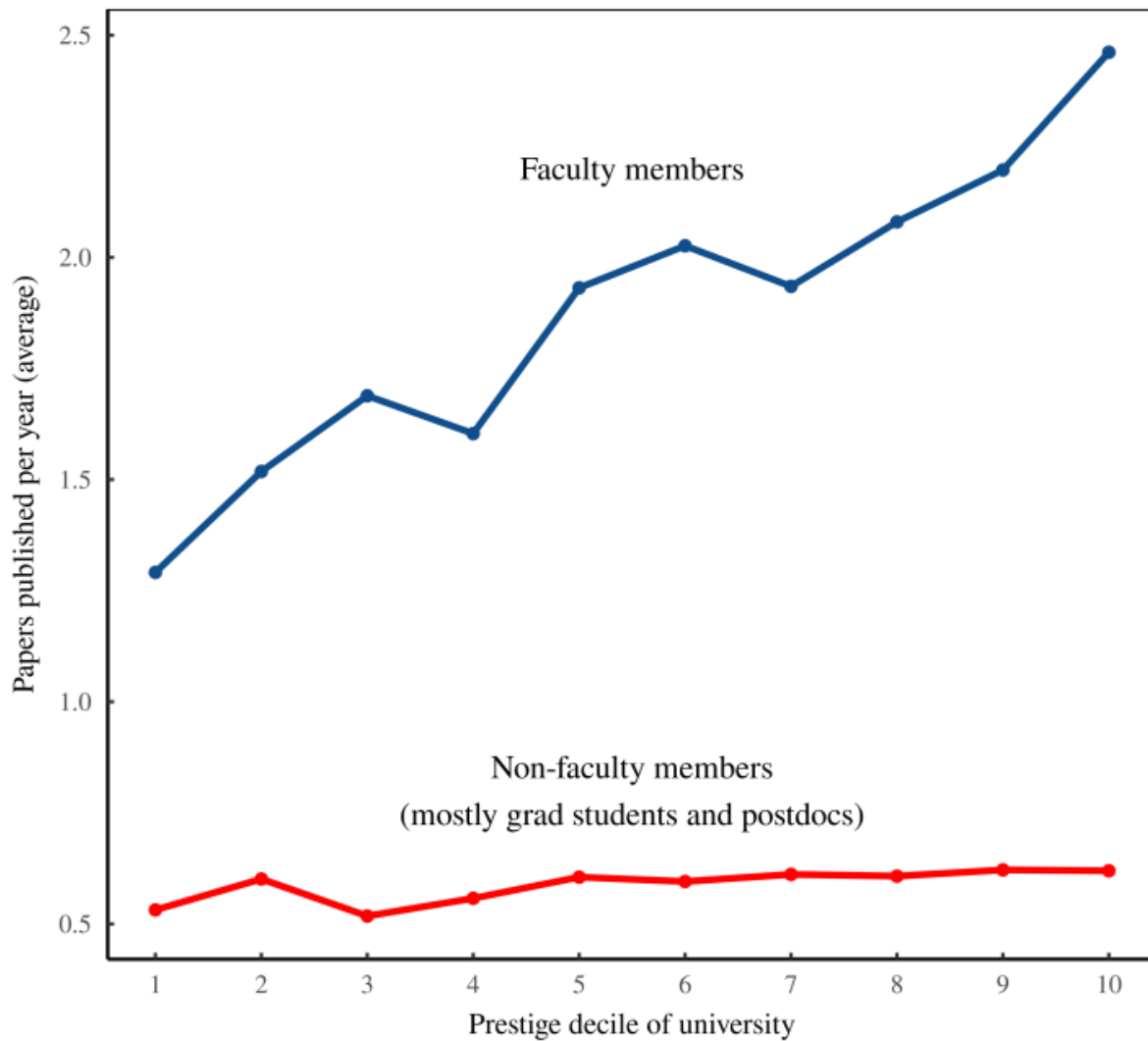
Academics are often duped by the hype landscape manufactured by elite universities. And so when confronted with the evidence in Figure 1, aspiring scholars arrive at the wrong conclusion: they think that prestigious academics are actually 'more productive researchers'.

For the moment, let's set aside the silliness of this conclusion. Supposing that elite academics are actually 'better researchers', this presents a huge problem for you, the ambitious but untalented scholar. If you manage to export yourself to a prestigious institution, you will remain the same second-rate thinker. And so in all likelihood, there will be no change in your academic output. You will therefore be a pariah among gods.

Do not fear, though, because this story is false. It is a byproduct of elite hype. In reality, prestigious academics are just like you: remarkably ambitious and reasonably dull.

To see this fact, we must return to the university's bowel system — the vast tract of non-faculty researchers. Like their faculty overlords, these bowel-system workers are not created equal. Some of them are lucky enough to have been exported to prestigious institutions. Now, if prestige was indeed an indicator of 'ability', then we expect that among bowel-system researchers, greater prestige should come with an ample boost to productivity (just as it does for faculty members). And yet when we look at the evidence, we find no such boost.

Figure 2 shows the numbers, which are again from Zhang and colleagues. Among bowel-system researchers (postdocs and funded grad students), increased prestige brings virtually no returns to productivity. It is a 'postdoc paradox'.



**Figure 2: Unlike faculty members, grad students and postdocs at prestigious universities are not more productive.** Data is from Zhang et al, 2022, who measure university prestige (horizontal axis) according to the faculty export network.

Of course, the lack of a prestige-based productivity boost is a 'paradox' only if we believe the hype departments at elite universities. At this point, I hope you know better. Elite academics are not superior researchers. They owe their greater productivity to a more civilized advantage: they control more 'human capital'.

## PRESTIGE BRINGS HUMAN CAPITAL

Economists have long known that the key to hyper-productivity is embarrassingly simple. To become hyper-productive, you must:

1. Accumulate subordinates;
2. Make them do your bidding;
3. Take credit for their work.

This tactic is so obvious that rulers everywhere have discovered it. But it was the pharaohs of ancient Egypt who perfected the strategy, instructing their slave armies to build useless monuments to their vanity, then taking credit for the resulting 'accomplishment'. Today's elite

academics use the same strategy, except that they order their subordinates to produce 'research'. (Despite stringent attempts to chase fads, this 'research' is sometimes useful — at least when judged on the scale of pyramids.)

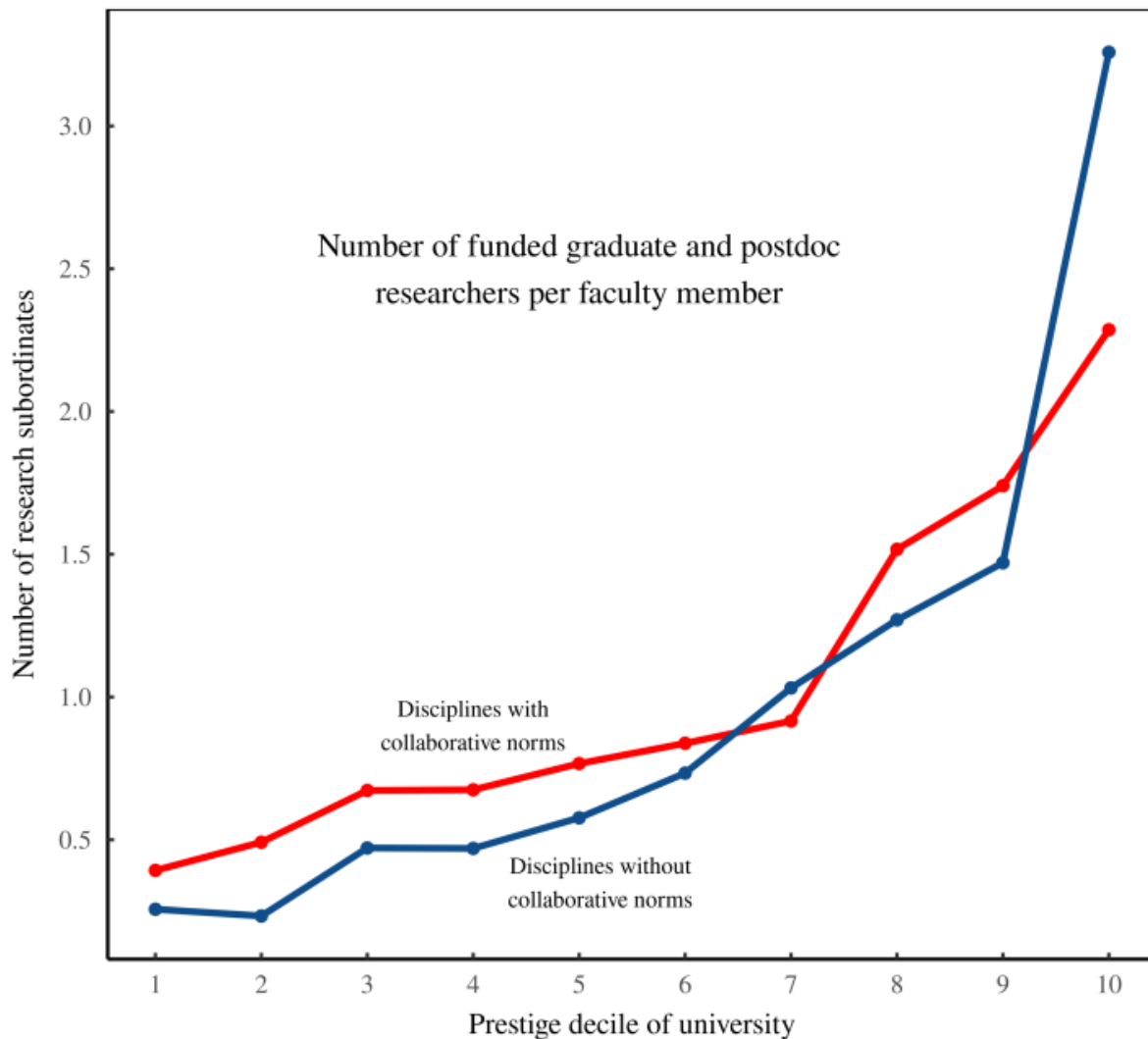
There is, however, a difference in how elite academics *discuss* their enterprise. While the rulers of antiquity boasted of their exploits, today the language of 'exploitation' has grown unpopular. And so elite academics describe their tactics using a euphemistic code called 'human capital theory'. It works as follows.

First, you continue exploiting subordinates and taking credit for their work (just as elites have always done). But instead of calling your tactic 'exploitation', you call it 'harnessing human capital'. The ruse is that your 'human capital' is *not* the mass of laborers at your disposal. (In human capital theory, these subordinates are conveniently absent.) No, your 'human capital' is a property of *you*, the exploiter. You are Pharaoh, single-handed builder of pyramids. Or in this case, you are 'Great Scientist', single-handed producer of volumes of 'important knowledge'.

Of course, this story sounds ridiculous when discussed in simple prose. That's why the real credit goes to economists from the University of Chicago — a cabal of ideologues who wrapped human capital theory in a veil of impenetrable mathematical jargon. The result is that we (the academic elite) can speak safely about 'human capital' without the laity discovering our hidden code. When we say 'human capital', we mean an 'army of research servants ready to do our bidding'.

Now that you understand the human-capital ruse, we can return to our friend, the elite academic. This academic is more productive than his/her unprestigious colleagues for a very simple reason: he/she has *more human capital*. Unsurprisingly, academics at prestigious universities have a greater pool of paper-producing subordinates at their disposal.

Figure 3 runs the numbers, which again come from Zhang and colleagues. Regardless of whether a discipline has 'collaborative norms', we find that faculty at elite universities command more subordinate researchers. This is the secret of human capital.



**Figure 3: Prestige brings human capital.** Faculty at prestigious universities have more 'human capital' — more paper-producing research subordinates. Data is from Zhang et al, 2022.

As an ambitious (but untalented) academic, I hope you now realize why it is essential to climb the prestige hierarchy. What's at stake is the supply of 'human capital' — the army of paper-producing subordinates on whose output you can stamp your name.

If you want to become a hyper-productive academic, you must accumulate a large pool of fealty-paying subordinates. And the easiest way to do that is to move to a more prestigious institution.

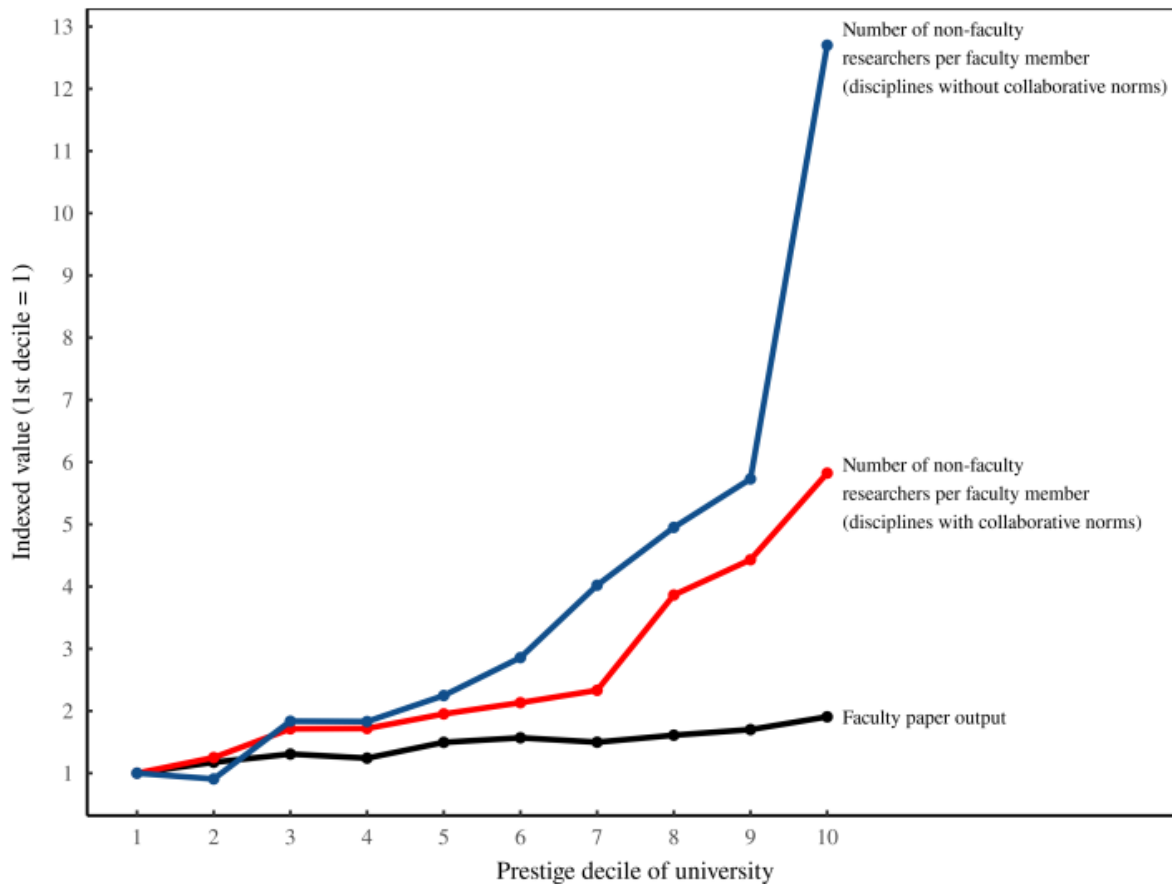
## GUARDING THE PRODUCTIVITY KEY

Now that we have unlocked the key to academic hyper-productivity, I must stress that by its nature, only a small minority of academics can actually wield this key. That's because the disproportionate control of research subordinates (that comes with institutional prestige) rests on the majority of academics having few (if any) research minions. So if you are lucky enough to hold the productivity key, it is important that you keep it safely guarded.

Remember, you want to maintain the illusion that it is *you* (and not your subordinates) who is researching and writing the papers on which your name appears. To sustain the ruse, avoid

stamping your name on every paper produced by your minions. Instead, namestamp a random subset of these papers. The exact portion is a personal choice. Know, however, that there are some established norms that should guide your behavior.

To that end, have a look at Figure 4. As institutional prestige increases, the control of subordinates grows more rapidly than paper output. Depending on the culture of the department, elite academics can control between 6 to 12 times more subordinate researchers than their unprestigious colleagues. And yet on average, elite academics produce only double the number of papers. In short, when extracting their authorship fealty, prestigious academics exhibit remarkable restraint.



**Figure 4: Namestamping restraint.** With greater prestige, the control of subordinate researchers grows faster than the authorship of papers. This trend illustrates an important social norm. The greater your prestige, the more restrained you must be with your namestamping fealty. Data is from Zhang et al, 2022.

From this evidence, we can deduce an important social norm. Academics with more prestige realize that their namestamping fealty must become more modest, lest the human-capital ruse be revealed. So if you manage to embed yourself in a prestigious institution, I suggest that you follow the namestamping protocols described during your departmental initiation. If you ignore these guidelines, you may blow your cover.

## IF YOU LET LOOSE

Let's face it, power corrupts. Once you gain command of the university bowel system, you may

find that the urge to namestamp becomes irresistible. Suppose you are seduced by your power and discover yourself ‘authoring’ hundreds of papers each year. The adrenaline rush will no doubt be intoxicating. But beware; there are insidious ‘researchers’ who may seek to discredit your hard work.

For example, in 2018, a handful of ‘researchers’ led by John Ioannidis had the audacity to identify a group of academic hyper-producers — elites who were each namestamping more than 72 papers per year. (That’s about one paper every 5 days.) While Ioannidis and colleagues found no evidence of ‘wrongdoing’, the tone of their article hinted that this scale of authorship was ‘excessive’.

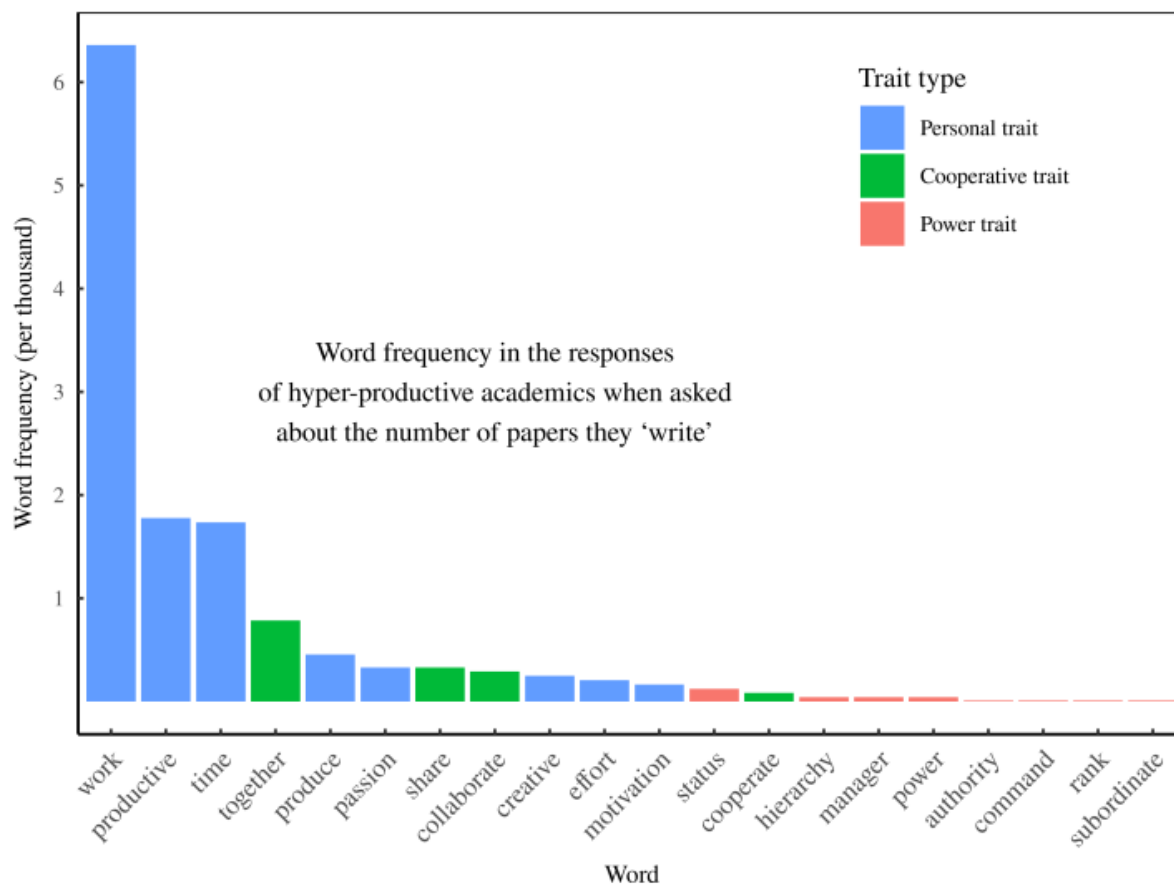
Of course, namestamping a paper every five days is a tad over-indulgent — a bit like taking a nightly bath in caviar. Still, elite academics have worked hard to ensconce their privilege. So if some of them want to swim in excess, we should turn a caviar-blinded eye.

More worrying than this over-indulgence is the fact that Ioannidis and his fellow ‘researchers’ requested that the hyper-producers explain their remarkable output. Fortunately, these academics were well trained in the art of human capital theory. In their responses, they credited their immense output to personal traits — things like ‘hard work’, ‘long hours’, and their ‘passion’ for science. In other words, these elites portrayed themselves as pharaohs, single-handed builders of pyramids.

If you are outed for excessive namestamping, I urge you to use the same technique. Emphasize that it is *you* (and not your power) that is responsible for your productivity. Yes, your response will feel ludicrous. But remember, economists at the University of Chicago have done the hard work of making elite hyper-productivity seem plausible. Your job is merely to regurgitate their ‘human capital theory’ with a straight face.

Since this straight-faced delivery can be more difficult than it seems, let us learn from the masters. To that end, have a look at Figure 5. Here I have analyzed how our elite academics responded when queried (by Ioannidis) about their nightly caviar baths.

On the horizontal axis I’ve listed 20 words. On the vertical axis, I measure the frequency of these words within the elites’ responses. Importantly, I’ve used color to classify the nature of these words. Blue words represent personal traits — things like your ‘work’ and your ‘time’. Green words represent cooperative traits — things like being ‘together’ and ‘collaborating’. Lastly, red words represent power traits (the true origin of hyper-productivity).



**Figure 5: Hyper-productive academics attribute their extreme 'output' mostly to personal traits.** This figure analyzes the word frequency in the responses of hyper-productive academics who were queried by Ioannidis and colleagues about their academic output. I've used color to classify words as either a personal trait, cooperative trait, or power trait.

Studying Figure 5, we see that our elite academics attribute their productivity overwhelmingly to personal traits. In other words, they are master purveyors of human capital theory. Notice, however, that amidst their personal traits, our hyper-producers mix in some themes of collaboration. Doing so is wise, as academics are a jealous lot. While you bathe in authorship caviar, it is best to throw your research minions a few scraps of credit. Although it feels wrong, this minimal attribution may stave off a future coup d'état.

What you must avoid, though, is admitting the true source of your hyper-productivity (your exploitation of subordinates). On that front, notice how when crafting their responses, our elite academics almost entirely omit the language power.

This doublespeak takes practice. As you sit in your management position within the university hierarchy, you will use your rank and power to command your subordinates to stamp your name on their papers. Yet you must never speak of this authority. To the outside world you must appear as Dr. Jekyll, hiding your exploits as Mr. Hyde.

Regrettably, the truth is that few people can handle this kind of cognitive dissonance. As a result, the competition for prestige naturally selects for the most deluded individuals — academics who actually believe that they are responsible for the productivity of their subordinates.

If you lack this innate delusion, note that it can be learned. Research has shown that studying economics can be a potent source of misunderstanding. So if you naturally ‘see’ the effects of hierarchical exploitation, your task is to immerse yourself in economics. Yes, it will be unpleasant, but it is one of the few well-documented routes to self-delusion.

(Alternatively, you can foster delusion by concussing yourself. Note, however, that repeated head trauma may distort your hairline, and thus detract from the grandeur of your headshot.)

## DO YOU HAVE WHAT IT TAKES?

Given sufficient training, nearly anyone can do high-quality research. However, it is the rare person who has the skills to become a hyper-productive academic. The job requires an astonishing range of talent.

To start, you must be a master of feigning knowledge. As a hyper-productive academic, you will frequently use words that you do not understand (because ‘understanding’ takes time away from namestamping) in a way that sounds highly intelligible (so you seem important) in a tone that is sufficiently condescending (so no one asks questions). The knowledge feign is such an intricate maneuver that few academics are able to master it.

The academic hyper-producer must also be an expert at handling people. Yes, grad students and postdocs are a servile lot who usually accept the yoke of authorship fealty with relative ease. Sometimes, however, grad students go rogue. For example, after 19 years of PhD servility, Theodore Streleski murdered his graduate advisor with a ball-peen hammer. To deal with this workplace hazard, you may want to study self defense.

Lastly, the academic hyper-producer must be adept at menial labor. You are, after all, little more than an automated stamp. Repetitive strain injury (from namestamping hundreds of papers) is an ever-present risk. And the boredom of long days doing nothing but stamping your name can be stultifying. To deal with this monotony, you must savor the prestige that ‘authorship’ brings. If prestige is not your intoxicant of choice, you may want to reconsider your career in academia.

Still, if you think you have what it takes, I encourage you to export yourself into the world of hyper-productive academia. It is a weird and wonderful place. Nowhere else can you do so little while appearing to create so much.

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## META

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